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**Devolving Diasporas: Migration and Reception in Central Scotland, 1980 – present**

**Objectives**

**1. An understanding of how readers in Central Scotland make sense of diasporic writing**

Despite the current UK interest in diasporic *texts* (e.g. *Small Island*) and *authors* (e.g. Zadie Smith), little is yet known about the actual *readers* of migrant literature and of how they make sense of the texts they read. Still less is known about the consumption and production of meaning in relation to these texts beyond the metropolitan centre. One of our primary objectives within this context is a detailed analysis of the reception of diasporic cultural production in Central Scotland. By recording a network of 5 reading groups in this region, empirical access to the 'live' reception of diasporic texts will be made available for the first time.

**2. A comparative analysis of reception at transnational levels**

Viewed in isolation the Scottish reception data tells us little about diasporic cultural production as a global, or transnational event. Our aim is to develop the case study of readers in Central Scotland to produce a comparative reading of diasporic reception by extending the network to incorporate a further 5 groups in Canada, India, North Africa, and the Caribbean. Reading groups within these dispersed locations will be recorded discussing the same texts as their Scottish counterparts, allowing us to identify and assess similarities and differences between reading values, priorities and interpretations. All reading groups will be networked via an online chat room, allowing individual readers to extend their discussion of the texts within a larger virtual 'community'.

**3. The 'devolution' of a diasporic literary canon**

Our proposal is motivated by the fact that contemporary studies of diaspora in the arts and humanities are founded upon a largely unexplored discrepancy. Despite revelations in cultural and postcolonial studies since the 1980s concerning the nomadic, itinerant nature of migrant identity, there remains the sense of a genuine place (London, Bombay, New York) of diasporic activity. Diasporic cultural production and criticism within the UK is unequivocally London-centred. Since the 1980s canonical and proto-canonical works by Hanif Kureishi, Andrea Levy, Salman Rushdie and Monica Ali have helped make the link between the migrant and the metropolis axiomatic. The aim of this project is not to question the significance of the capital for diasporic writing, or to propose a separate canon organized around some kind of literary 'north-south divide'. Rather, our objective is to promote the presence of a 'devolved' diasporic culture within the UK, showcasing the work of writers in Central Scotland. We will do this through the production of an anthology of 'devolving' diasporic literature in Scotland, the North of England and the Midlands (Bloodaxe), a database (see below), and a programme of arts events in Central Scotland, including a writing competition and a stage adaptation of Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*.

#### **4. The assistance of public institutions in Central Scotland in showcasing the cultural contribution of diasporic communities**

The project will work in close collaboration with local lending libraries and the Macrobert Theatre (<http://www.macrobert.org/>) in order to highlight the cultural contribution of Central Scotland's South Asian, African and Caribbean communities. Our close engagement with reading groups and audiences at these public institutions will allow sustained involvement with a wide cross section of local stakeholders, from the 'host' as well as the 'migrant' community. We will also produce a searchable database including bibliographical details of diasporic writing and performances in Central Scotland, 1980-present. In 2004-5 the Lottery funded £334,244 arts initiatives in Scotland dealing with 'cultural diversity', we want to ensure such present and past projects are documented so that the extent of 'diasporic' cultural production in Scotland can be appreciated.

#### **Research Methods**

The Scottish reading groups are to be organised by local librarians and will draw upon pre-existing groups already affiliated to public libraries in the region. All reading groups will be recorded by a technician using audio and video recording equipment. The transnational reading groups will be recorded in exactly the same way by a local organiser responsible for setting up and maintaining the group. Local and transnational reading sessions will overlap, and will be completed in the first six months of 2007. The provisional reading list for all groups is as follows:

1. Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (2003)
2. Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (2004)

3. Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2001)
4. Jackie Kay, *The Adoption Papers* (2000) and selected writing in Central Scotland from 1980 to present
5. Scottish networks: Stage adaptation of *The Adoption Papers*  
Transnational networks: UK diasporic text of 'local' significance: e.g. Kunru's *Transmission* (2004) in India, and Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) in N.Africa.)

The first three texts emerge from a similar 'regime of value' and have a notable coherence in terms of their date of publication, fictional location (London) and global consecration. By minimizing the variables in this way, we will be able to pursue comparative studies across the various reading groups.

The investigators will not be present at the meetings, and will not seek to direct the discussions in any way. All members of the reading groups will be networked via a Web-based 'reception area' containing a 'chat room' where the dispersed reading groups can share responses to the prescribed reading, and a 'bulletin board' where the investigators will post questionnaires for each session, and keep reading groups informed of project developments. The reception area adds an extra dimension to our recorded data, allowing us to identify differences between group and individual responses, and to ask more directed questions. The site will also allow local readers to share their readings with the entire transnational network.

The collation and transcription of recordings, questionnaires and chat room discussions by a freelance transcriber will take place in Autumn 2007. The transcriptions will be held by Benwell, Procter and Robinson, and will form the basis of a co-authored book-length study. The first half of the book will be a descriptive account of the reception data. The second half of the book will offer individual chapters adopting a variety of methodologies to provide the 'thickest' possible description of the reception data.

In 2008, Stirling University will host an international conference on 'Reception and Diaspora'. This will provide an early opportunity for the project team to disseminate their findings, concerning both archival research on cultural production and reading groups. All organisers from the transnational network will be provided with travel expenses to attend the conference, and will be invited to give feedback on their reading group experience.

## **Outputs**

- i. A book-length study based on the findings from the reading group data.
- ii. An edited anthology published by Bloodaxe Books and focusing on 'devolving' South Asian, African and Caribbean poetry within the

- UK. The anthology will be divided into three sections: Scotland, the North and The Midlands, and will invite short statements from the poets regarding their sense of local/regional identity in the UK.
- iii. A 3-night performance of *The Adoption Papers* at the Macrobert theatre, Stirling. The performance will emerge out of a series of workshops over 7 months involving the youth theatre group (dir. Liz Moran). Reading groups will receive free tickets to the performance, where they will engage in discussions with the actors, director, and the audience to provide a multi-dimensional view of reception.
  - iv. A poetry competition (winning entry to be included in the Bloodaxe anthology). Judges: Professor Angela Smith (Commonwealth Writers Prize); Jackie Kay, and Gemma Robinson (Guyana Writers Prize).
  - v. An international conference entitled 'Reception and Diaspora'. This conference will take place in 2008 and will be used to publicise our project, to refine our sense of the relationship between migration and reception, and to stimulate our first writings based on the reception data.
  - vi. Three journal articles (see 'Methods'), one by each of the academic investigators. These articles will initially be presented as papers at the conference on 'Reception and Diaspora'. The papers will be based on early findings from the transcribed reception data.
  - vii. A searchable bibliography of diasporic cultural production (including writing, performance art and exhibitions) in Central Scotland, 1980-present. The database will include references for works, but not the works themselves. Archival information will be uploaded monthly (2007-2009) by a technician dedicated to the task.